3100

A SERMON

PREACHED AT

THE GENERAL ORDINATION

OF THE

HONOURABLE AND RIGHT REVEREND

RICHARD, LORD BISHOP OF OXFORD,

IN THE

CATHEDRAL OF CHRIST CHURCH,

OXFORD,

ON TRINITY SUNDAY,

MAY 29, 1836.

BY

FREDERICK OAKELEY, M.A.

FELLOW OF BALLIOL COLLEGE, OXFORD.

PUBLISHED AT THE REQUEST OF THE LORD BISHOP.

OXFORD,

PRINTED BY S. COLLINGWOOD, PRINTER TO THE UNIVERSITY,

FOR J. H. PARKER;

AND SOLD BY J. G. AND F. RIVINGTON, LONDON.

M.DCCC.XXXVI.

3100

ST. LUKE ix. 59—62.

And He said unto another, Follow me. But he said, Lord, suffer me first to go and bury my father. Jesus said unto him, Let the dead bury their dead: but go thou and preach the kingdom of God. And another also said, Lord, I will follow thee: but let me first go bid them farewell, which are at home at my house. And Jesus said unto him, No man, having put his hand to the plough, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God.

THIS is one of those instances, familiar to the reader of the Holy Gospels, in which our Blessed Lord took occasion from some passing and (if in such a case we may use the expression) accidental circumstance to proclaim a moral lesson for the instruction of His immediate followers, and, through them, of the Church in every age.

There is something peculiarly interesting and memorable in such Divine Apophthegms thus connected with striking events in the history of our Lord's ministry. The fact which led, at the time, to the enunciation of the general truth, serves afterwards for an illustration of that truth. It brings imagination to the aid of memory;—personifies a principle;—forms a picture in the mind, which more readily presents itself upon an emergency, than a train of abstract reasoning, or an isolated

maxim. The case of the Galileans, whose blood Pilate mingled with their sacrifices, or of those eighteen, upon whom the tower in Siloam fell, gives this kind of graphic interest to the truth, that Divine judgments are designed to minister, not to uncharitableness, but to personal edification[a];—the temptations of wealth are associated in our minds with the history of the rich young ruler, whose worldliness of heart gave occasion to our Lord to draw His sorrowful inference[b] with respect to the tendency of riches in general. And, in like manner, the unseemliness of a wavering profession (which is the lesson of the text) is impressed upon our memories, as well by the strongly figurative language in which our Blessed Lord has clothed that awful truth, as by the two striking incidents, which led Him to declare it.

St. Luke, alone of the Evangelists, mentions these two incidents in immediate connexion with one another: "And He said unto another, Follow me. But he said, Lord, suffer me first to go and bury my father. And Jesus said unto him, Let the dead bury their dead: but go thou and preach the kingdom of God. And another also said, Lord, I will follow thee: but let me first go bid them farewell, which are at home at my house."

St. Matthew mentions[c] the first of these applications, without the second. It is not, perhaps, necessary to suppose that both took place together. All we have reason to know is, that both were actually made. And, although both of the requests indi-

[a] St. Luke xiii. 1—5. [b] St. Matt. xix. 23.
[c] St. Matt. viii. 21.

cated the same state of mind, there are yet interesting points of difference between them. In the one case, the worldly engagement is pleaded as a reason for disobeying, or hesitating to obey, Christ's call. In the other, it is urged in retractation, or, at least, qualification, of a voluntary offer of service. Our Lord seems to have regarded the latter of the two applicants as in the more unpromising state [d]; although His rebuke is more direct and personal in the former instance. To the first He seems to say, "Leave to others whom it better befits, an office which, however becoming in thee at another time, is inconsistent with thy new profession." Of the second He implies that he had already begun to "look back;" to mourn over what he had resigned. The Searcher of hearts (we may believe) well knew that a worldly home would have too many charms for a disciple so easily shaken in his purpose. "Jesus said unto him, No man having put his hand to the plough, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God."

But it is much to be observed, that the alleged engagements upon which both of these applications were grounded were in themselves strictly lawful and

[d] St. Augustin (Sermo C. ad Populum) thus characterises the two applicants mentioned in the text: "Alius non audebat, et excitatus est; alius differebat, et culpatus est." With respect to the excuse urged by the former of the two, he says, "Dominus Christus quando parat homines Evangelio, nullam excusationem vult interponi carnalis temporalisque pietatis. Volebat iste juvenis obtemperare Deo, et sepelire patrem suum; sed est locus, et est tempus, et est res, quæ huic rei, huic tempori, huic loco serviat. Honorandus est pater, sed obediendum est Deo. Amandus est generator, sed præponendus est Creator."

even praiseworthy. Both had their origin in those affections of our nature, of which our compassionate Redeemer was so far from discouraging the exercise, that, on several occasions, He both recognised their value, and exemplified them in His own character. Decent respect for the dead—especially in the case of one connected with the applicant by ties so close and sacred—kind consideration for the feelings of the living on the eve of a lengthened separation—were these motives *in themselves* of a nature to be undervalued, these feelings likely to have been slighted and shocked, by Him who so beautifully exemplified the filial and friendly relations of life? by Him who shed tears of sympathy over the grave of Lazarus; and in the midst of His agony on the Cross, consigned His Mother to the care of His bosom friend?

Surely not. But hence it is that the lesson conveyed by the text derives its peculiar value. It is an exemplification, from real life, of that most important truth, which our Saviour has elsewhere established by an invented instance;—that things lawful, and even praiseworthy *in themselves*, become positively sinful, when permitted to interfere with the call and service of the Saviour. It cannot be thought merely accidental, that the excuses of those, who in the parable of the Marriage Feast are described as neglecting the original invitation of the King, are, one and all of them, grounded upon engagements in themselves strictly lawful—the farm, the merchandise, the ties of domestic life. And thus in the present case also, had the ground of these excuses been something sinful, we might have

argued, (the human heart is skilled in such sophistry,) that what was refused to wickedness would have been allowed to mere worldliness; we should then have gained a warning against apostasy, but, together with it, have seemed to ourselves to secure an indemnity for mere wavering; the rarer and more enormous sin would have received its check; the more frequent and seductive would have sheltered itself under the cover of a tacit recognition.

As it is, there is no pretence for any such distinction. Not things sinful; not things indifferent; not things merely lawful; but things positively good and praiseworthy, are set forth in the searching and uncompromising law of the Gospel, as those which have a tendency to interfere with the claims of Christ upon our first and principal regard. The most favourable case is exhibited, that so the rest may be left to the operation of a plain *a fortiori* argument. If even these may not interfere with duty, how much less those? If even the worldly be excluded from the kingdom of God, how shall it fare with the wicked?

The practical conclusion which our Lord derives from these incidents is thus expressed:—"No man, having put his hand to the plough, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God." In the words "looking back," we may perhaps discover an allusion to that lingering love of the world for which Lot's wife was punished, and of which she has been set forth by our Lord as a memorable instance. In plain language, our Saviour enjoins, by these words, upon His followers, a straightforward, unflinching, unrepining, course of duty, with an eye

turned away from worldly and distracting objects, and steadily fixed upon the one great end.

He refers, doubtless, in the first instance, to all who take up their cross to follow Him, whether teachers or others. But in one of the instances recorded in the text, provision is directly made for the case—to us at this time peculiarly interesting—of the Christian Minister. What the former of these two wavering disciples was inclined to disregard, was not an ordinary call, but a special Commission. "Jesus said unto him, Let the dead bury their dead: but go thou and *preach the kingdom of God.*"

In one respect, the case of the Christian Minister comes nearer to that which our Lord contemplated, than that of the ordinary Christian in the present age of the Church. The Ministerial responsibilities are spontaneously and deliberately chosen. They correspond therein with the profession of the Gospel in the first age of Christianity. Ordinary Christians are now, in some sort, pledged by the act of others to their profession; not of course unalterably, but in a way different from that in which the Minister contracts his obligations. He puts himself (if I may so say) out of his way to do more than others; voluntarily superadds to the responsibilities which he shares with ordinary Christians, others peculiar to himself, and preeminently fearful.

His then, if he afterwards shrink from his duties as difficult and irksome, is the reproach of the thoughtless builder[a], who failed to count the cost of his tower; or of the rash king, who consulted not

[a] St. Luke xiv. 28—33.

before the battle, whether, with his ten thousand, he could meet the enemy with his twenty thousand.

It was competent to him never to have undertaken the trust. It is inexcusable in him to betray it. "Whiles it remained (his freedom from this self-sought responsibility, this condition of more than duty) was it not in his own power[b]?" It is for belying his profession that he is condemned.

Not, indeed, that any one ought so to represent the obligations and the difficulties of the Christian minister, as to underrate those of the ordinary Christian. It is a prevailing fault to make unwarrantable, because unscriptural, distinctions between the standards of duty respectively marked out for the Clergyman and the Layman. The clerical standard is not commonly set too high, (that were hardly possible,) but that of the ordinary Christian is set infinitely too low. Did men, indeed, content themselves with saying, that Ministers are raised up in God's Church to be burning and shining lights; that *their* failures in duty involve consequences peculiarly disastrous; that what may be lawful in others is often unlawful in them; they would say no more than the Bible warrants. But they are apt to do much more than this—to try the Minister and another not only by different, but even by opposite, rules; speaking of the Church as if laymen were not Churchmen; and tending to the Romish error of regarding the religion of the Clergy as, in some sort, a substitute for that of the rest.

Desiring, then, in any thing which may hereafter be said of the duties, and the trials, of the Christian Minister, to guard against seeming to represent

[b] Acts v. 4.

those duties and trials as altogether (for in part they are) peculiar to him, I will endeavour, by God's help, and with earnest prayer for His enlightening grace, to ground upon the text a review of some (and but a few) of the dangers and difficulties which beset the Minister's path by reason of the influence of things visible upon the human heart.

What is it to look back, when we have put our hand to the plough?

It is to divide (or rather to seek to divide—for our Lord has declared such division impossible[c]) between God and the world, an allegiance pledged to God only. It is to waver in our profession; as though we doubted whether the invisible world had really that superiority over the visible, which, in every prayer offered, and every sermon preached, by us, we declare, or imply, that it has. It is to have God upon our lips, and the world in our hearts.

It is true, that the altered circumstances of the Church modify, in some degree, the sense of passages like the text. The Church in the world is not quite the same thing with the Church out of the world. And yet is not this distinction grounded, in part, upon an ambiguity of language? For the world is not so much a society as a system, outliving changes of circumstance, overstepping the bounds of time and place; something not external to us, but within us; depending for its shape, indeed, but not for its existence, upon outward circumstances. It is coextensive with the visible universe; it will last until the objects of sight shall have given place to those realities which are the subject of Faith. It is the partition-wall between us and

[c] St. Matt. vi. 24.

heaven; Faith's abiding obstacle; God's antagonist.

Yet let us not omit to acknowledge with gratitude whatever facilities of a true profession the altered position of the Church in these days brings with it. That inconsistency, for instance, between the Christian, and especially the Ministerial, profession, and the comforts of domestic life, which we gather from the text to have prevailed in our Saviour's time, does not exist—at least not to the same extent—at present. It is now rather the exception, than the rule, of the Church. The life of the Missionary is the only precise parallel, in the present age, to the Ministerial profession in our Lord's time, and that immediately succeeding. The ordinary Minister of the existing Church is permitted to draw large comfort from the endearments of friendship and domestic life.

But the spirit required of him is ever the same. A necessity for sacrifices like those from which the applicants mentioned in the text were averse, may arise at any time. And of the various forms which the world assumes, none is more seductive and ensnaring than that of legitimate, but secondary, engagements. The conscience acknowledges the reality of such duties; the corruption of the heart blinds us to the fact of their subordination. And besides, the temptation to sacrifice to such inferior regards the paramount claims of the Redeemer is now increased in proportion as the system under which we live is less visible. It is the triumph of Faith to equal the evidence of sight. We are speaking of its imperfection. The subordinate duty appeals to sight; the higher belongs to the world unseen. The living

Saviour is not now at hand with His look of reproof, and His word of condemnation: the whispers of the Spirit are less audible than His call: the remonstrance of conscience is less powerful than His rebuke. There is more room for subterfuge and evasion, and explaining away, and the influence of the wish upon the thought; in a word, for all the multiform deceits of the human heart.

Thus far of that which is, in some respects, the most dangerous, because most specious, form, in which the world is apt to draw off the Christian Minister from his duty—the form of domestic ties, and legitimate, though secular, engagements.

Less need be said, because the apparent danger is greater, of the next form in which worldliness assails the Minister; the fascinations of society, with their attendant temptations to the neglect of duty, and the love of popularity; and their tendency to identify the Ministerial character in human eyes with that of the mere man of the world. It would little consist with the particular line of teaching at present marked out for me (which is one rather of suggestion, as from an equal, than of authoritative direction, as from a superior) to give minute rules for conduct in this or any other department of Ministerial duty. And it is surely wiser and better to make this particular subject altogether a matter rather of principles than of details. We must beware of giving to specific acts and practices, whether in the case of Ministers or others, an undue importance as criteria of character. There is much danger, in this way, both of self-deception and of uncharitable judgment. But having said thus much in the way of exception, I must go on to observe,

that, if there is a danger on this side, there is a danger of far greater magnitude on the other; that the province of "things indifferent" is by the generality far too widely extended; that if to the ordinary Christian there are but few things perfectly indifferent, there are to the Christian Minister still fewer—that many things which may be expedient in others are in him inexpedient; and many which in others are only inexpedient are in him unlawful —that many an eye is fixed on him which never rests on others; many an ear open to his words upon which those of another fall without effect; that his example and influence form many a character, for which others are in no way responsible; that nothing, lastly, is to him a matter indifferent, which engrosses time dedicated to God; dissipates a mind professedly set upon things above; makes him even seem to countenance what he cannot or ought not to approve; or casts a stumbling-block in the way of one "brother for whom Christ died." For all Christians, but especially for him who is to be an ensample to the flock, there is a rule of discretion, and seemliness, and consistency, over and above the rule of strict lawfulness. There is many a scene and society not, it may be, definitely objectionable—not positively sinful—in which the Christian, and especially the Christian Minister, might hear (would he only listen) the Spirit whispering, "What doest thou HERE, Elijah [c]?"

It is painful even to assume as an hypothesis, the third case of temptations to Ministerial unfaithfulness; in the way of more open and acknowledged sin. Yet let this ever be remembered, that the sa-

[c] 1 Kings xix. 9.

credness of the Ministerial functions, though a means of holy living, is no guarantee for it. Many a young man (I am persuaded) is led to neglect the right discipline and preparation for the Ministry, by a false and fatal expectation, that all will come in due time; that his new profession will all at once reverse his tastes and habits, without the pain of previous self-denial; that constant occupation in the service of the Sanctuary, and familiarity with scenes of poverty and distress, will produce that sober and serious frame of mind, that love of goodness and distaste for sin, which many can admire in others who fail to cultivate it for themselves. That such a case, in all its force, exists among those who now hear me, I will not suppose; but something like it, I am quite sure, is far from uncommon among those who are by no means the most unfit candidates for the Ministry.

As a general rule, then, let me earnestly warn you against this delusion. Trust not too much to the effect of impressions at first strong, but sure, according to a well-known law of our nature, to grow gradually weaker. Such impressions are, as we know, the invaluable materials of habit; but they are perishable in their own nature, and out of their ruins grow habits of evil. To something more substantial we must look, both before and after admission to the Ministry, than to the power of its associations. Something better is needed to overcome that natural corruption which the Minister shares with his flock. Holy Orders increase our responsibilities; multiply our opportunities; to those also who receive them rightly they are a means of imparting grace as well as authority. But they

do not, of necessity, (God knoweth,) and in themselves, change our nature. To attribute to them this power were to invest them with a character above that of the two especial "Sacraments of the Gospel." For even of these, as we know, the benefit may be frustrated by the ill disposition of the recipient; and collision with the world will weaken, and in time destroy, even *their* effects; so that one of them must quickly be succeeded by the other; and the other oftentimes repeated; and the intervals filled up with prayer, and meditation, and reading of the Word, and all other helps and encouragements to the Divine Spirit. And from the need of all such aids the Minister is not more exempt than another. By all means in his power, he must seek to overcome the world about him and the corruption of nature within him. Against these dangers, Prayer, more especially, is our ever-present safeguard. We must pray, that, while we preach to others, we ourselves may not become reprobates; pray against the hardening effects of custom; pray, that when our Ministry shall have become an ordinary thing, somewhat of that freshness of spirit with which new duties are always undertaken, may still be preserved to us; and the intensity of feeling, the liveliness of interest, the ardour of resolution, the energy of Faith, the brightness of Hope, the disregard of the world, the love of God and man which this day's Solemnity has a tendency to inspire, (for if It fails, what will inspire them?) may animate and cheer us along our every day path; amid the sober realities of ordinary, homely, life.

The course of my subject has led me to speak rather of the Minister's personal character than of

his peculiar functions. One step, however, and by no means the least important, towards his efficiency in the Church for whose interests he is bound to watch, will be gained by the regulation of his own heart, and a successful opposition to the difficulties which beset his own course. Many a man can reprove sin in others, and admire holiness at a distance, who is himself in danger of becoming a castaway. But none can overcome the world within him without being thereby fitted for the work of converting others. For, besides the powerful influence of example—the quiet instructiveness of a holy life—he will also, in the progress of the work, have acquired that reality of feeling in religion, that experimental acquaintance with its Holy Truths, which outweighs, in persuasiveness, all human learning and human eloquence. It is when our own hearts are converted, that we are best able to "strengthen our brethren[c]." He that has found out the Saviour, will (like St. Andrew) burn to make Him known to his brother[d]; and his report will be the more readily believed, as it seems to come from the heart.

Still, however, the Minister has many difficulties to encounter besides those which meet him in the attempt to regulate his own life. To preach the Gospel with all its strict requirements and unwel-

[c] St. Luke xxii. 32.

[d] St. John i. 41, 42. Christian Year. St. Andrew's Day.—I should ill satisfy my feelings were I to lose this opportunity of publicly expressing my grateful sense of the good to which the last mentioned work has, within my own experience, been rendered instrumental, by the mode in which it has enlisted feeling and imagination in the cause of true Religion.

come truths; to proclaim "Christ crucified," now, as of old, (for the principle of the opposition is ever the same,) to the worldliness of the human heart, "a stumblingblock"—to the pride of human intellect, "foolishness;" to gather into Christ's fold His sheep scattered over this naughty world; to rebuke sin, whether in its bolder, or its more disguised, shapes; to draw forth and encourage goodness, even when unaccompanied by those qualities which the world admires;—all this, my brethren, is difficult.

But against these difficulties God has been pleased to furnish helps and encouragements peculiarly our own. If any Christian be more eminently than another his Saviour's friend, the Minister is he. If one more than another may look for large supplies of God's all-prevailing grace, it is he who is charged with the execution of God's own proper work. The Christian Minister is the Lord's commissioned Representative; bearing His own peculiar titles; accomplishing His own especial ends; the Shepherd of His sheep; His Ambassador, reconciling God to man in His stead; the authorized Dispenser of His most precious Body and Blood. With sin and worldliness, my brethren, how ill do such offices comport!

And the Minister has promises of glory, as of help, peculiarly his own. Every sinner saved by his instrumentality shall add a jewel to his eternal diadem. They that "turn many to righteousness shall shine as the stars for ever and ever[e]."

To the enjoyment of these exalted titles—to the inheritance of these all-glorious hopes—many of you, my brethren, are this day to be admitted. Yours

[e] Dan. xii. 3.

it will henceforth be, to discharge, in one way or another—with respect to one or another portion of God's people—the office of feeding with the bread of life, and leading beside the waters of comfort, those whom Christ hath died to redeem with His most precious Blood. It is too late now to inquire, by what motives you have been led to undertake this tremendous charge. Charity hopeth the best; and even if worse be true, there is time for repentance. But, at all events, you have undertaken it: you have "put your hand to the plough."

A new world of privilege and opportunity is thus opened to you. For the second time in your lives, the Church sends you forth into the midst of trial; and She speeds you on your way, as before, with prayer. The thought, indeed, of human weakness and sinfulness interposes, as in Baptism, to cloud the joys of Charity. But we feel that you go forth to the battle in the strength of the Lord of Hosts; furnished with weapons from God's own armoury; and with allies on your side many more in number, and far more powerful than they who are against you.

One observation more, and I will conclude. An Ordination in this diocese, (it was remarked by my predecessor in this pulpit on the last similar occasion[e], but the remark will bear to be repeated,) is, in one respect, peculiar. Many who now hear me will not be called immediately to those of the Ministerial duties which are more strictly pastoral. It is a wise and wholesome rule which consigns the education of the youth of this country to the Clergy.

[e] Ordination Sermon by the Rev. William Jacobson, published at Oxford, 1836.

But it is a rule which casts very peculiar difficulties and temptations in the way of the Clergy themselves. By long residence in the Universities, many of them are unfitted for those engagements which are more immediately professional. And in the mean time they run great risk of losing the character of the Clergyman in that of the mere man of literature, or of the world.

Let me most earnestly entreat those of you whose responsibilities are likely to be in the first instance academical rather than parochial, to be on your guard against these dangers. Consider, I beseech you, that solemn injunction of our Ordination Service, that you will make "all your cares and studies bend one way." For this right direction of your *studies*, a residence in the University affords extraordinary facilities. And in the charge to which many among you will succeed, of tutorial occupations, you will have the opportunity of giving a similar turn to your more active duties, by regarding those who may be committed to your care, as thus intrusted to you, not merely that you may draw forth their intellectual powers, and open to them the treasures of human learning, but that you may employ your influence in shielding them from spiritual harm at an age of peculiar danger; and in directing their minds to that "Wisdom from above," in comparison whereof the wisdom of this world is foolishness.

To combine the character of the man of learning and academical usefulness with that of the zealous Christian Minister, is, indeed, difficult; but, happily for us, it is to the all-sufficient grace of God no impossibility. In this University, and more especially

in this Church, I am sure that the feelings of my hearers will have outrun me in anticipating the mention of one, whose character furnished a bright instance of that rare union; one, whose accustomed presence we this day miss[f]; whose living words no longer awaken and admonish us; but who, though "dead, yet speaketh," by his example, to us who remain; shewing how compatible with profound learning and various gifts of intellect, is the grace of Christian simplicity, and the charity of Christian zeal. No place, my brethren, and least of all one of so great influence upon the religious character of the country as this University, is barren of opportunities to him whose heart is in the cause of his Saviour. To him, whom God's Providence withholds for a time from duties more congenial to his taste, it must ever be a consolation and an incitement to feel, that the eternal interests, not of one, but of many parishes, are, to a certain extent, in his hands; that here, and by his instrumentality under Divine Providence, is formed many a character to which hundreds and thousands, of whom he now thinks not, may come hereafter to look for direction and example.

[f] The Ordination at which this sermon was preached, was the first which had been held in the Cathedral of Christ Church since the lamented death of the Rev. Dr. Burton, Canon of that Church, and Regius Professor of Divinity in the University of Oxford.